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Hostage Rescue Try Wasn't Necessary

President Carter justified the disastrous Iranian rescue mission on grounds that deteriorating conditions inside Iran had placed the American hostages in greater jeopardy than they had been in. But the president's intelligence experts had reported just the opposite.

In other words, the fiasco that cost eight American lives, humiliated the United States and added to the hostages' danger was not necessary. And the president had been told that.

As recently as April 18, a secret intelligence report concluded that the continuing political turmoil in Iran posed no particular threat to the captives in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

"The situation in Iran is no better and no worse than six months ago," the report stated. It also warned that economic and military sanctions were not likely to gain release of the hostages.

Furthermore, though Pentagon spokesmen have denied any knowledge of a study showing that the rescue mission might have resulted in the deaths or injuries of nearly half the hostages and an even greater number of their rescuers, reliable sources assured my reporter Ron McRae that just such a "worst-case scenario" did exist.

It was hoped, of course, that all the hostages would have been brought out unharmed, while subterfuge and anesthetic gas would have enabled the rescuers to avoid any casualties if all went well. But the so-called "worst-case scenario" envisioned 20 casualties among the 53 hostages and 50 or more among their rescuers.

And while Carter has made much of the fact that no Iranians were harmed in the aborted rescue attempt, what he has chosen to ignore is that the "humanitarian" effort called for use of massive lethal force that could have brought death or injury to hundreds of Iranians. The main reason the Iranian people—for whom the president expressed such concern—were not subjected to bombing was that the mission was called off in its preliminary stage.

The helicopters that were to be used to evacuate the hostages and their rescue team were to be given protective cover by F14 fighter aircraft from the carrier Nimitz. Contingency plans called for the bombing of selected targets around the embassy compound to prevent reinforcements to the Iranian militants holding the embassy captives.

In short, the president's claim that the rescue mission was nonmilitary in character was, to put it mildly, disingenuous. Had the mission proceeded to its second and third stages, it might well have resulted in a bloody battle.